

# **EXHIBIT 12**

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LIFE & WORKIDEASESSAY

# Why the U.S. Shouldn't Blindly Follow Saudi Arabia

Donald Trump's shift to confront Iran risks destabilizing the Middle East, worsening sectarian rifts and dragging the U.S. further into futile fights



**Simon Exhibit  
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**New presidents** like new approaches to old problems, so it isn't surprising that President Donald Trump has embraced a more confrontational policy toward Iran, one of the thorniest problems in U.S. foreign policy. Responding to a newly adventurous Saudi foreign policy, Mr. Trump has abandoned America's historic practice of tamping down tensions in the Middle East and lined up behind Iran's main rivals, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab allies. But there are dangers in this shift, which threatens to destabilize the region, worsen sectarian rifts and drag the U.S. further into futile fights.

On Mr. Trump's recent trip to the Middle East, he signaled unqualified support for Saudi Arabia and its Sunni Arab friends in their rivalry with Iran, the region's Shiite power. The longtime competition between the two big Muslim powers has intensified since civil war broke out in Syria in 2011, pitting that now-wrecked country's Iranian-backed regime against a Sunni majority. In Mr. Trump's speech in Riyadh, he blamed Iran "for so much

instability in the region.”

The president waded in deeper this week, threatening to end the longstanding U.S. partnership with Qatar (the lone Gulf Arab state with significant ties to Iran) and issuing a White House statement strikingly lacking in empathy after Islamic State claimed credit for a double terrorist attack in Tehran—a departure from Washington’s practice of condemning terrorism no matter the victim. Mr. Trump’s frequent criticisms of the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and his support for more U.S. sanctions against Tehran suggest that the White House is now adopting a more hostile posture than previous administrations.

All of this amounts to a perilous change of course. The U.S. has been a staunch Saudi ally since 1945 and an implacable foe of Iran since its 1979 revolution, but under both Democratic and Republican presidents, the longstanding policy has been to avoid fanning Sunni-Shiite strains and inflaming regional tensions.

The consequences of Mr. Trump’s new tilt were on stark display this week. For decades, Saudi Arabia has had a tense relationship with its wealthy, activist neighbor Qatar, but the dramatic severing of diplomatic ties with Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and others was a jolt to the region. Most see the breach as having been sparked partly by Qatar’s amicable ties with Iran—and having at least the tacit support of Mr. Trump, who tweeted critically of Qatar on Tuesday. U.S. diplomats are now scrambling to patch things up, not least because Qatar hosts more than 10,000 U.S. service members at the main American base in the region.

It is no surprise that Mr. Trump is seeking to improve ties with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arabs, who complained endlessly about President Barack Obama’s supposed fecklessness and slant toward Iran. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in particular are longtime U.S. partners, with close intelligence relationships that are essential for combating terrorism.

But Saudi and Emirati interests are not necessarily identical with those of the U.S. The Saudis and the Emiratis, for example, are both cool to the Iran nuclear deal, even though most members of the American and Israeli security establishments have come to see it as a significant boost for regional stability.

The heightened tensions may push the Iranians to abandon the agreement. If Iran were to do that and resume its race to acquire a nuclear option, the U.S. could soon face difficult



choices, including the possibility of a bombing campaign to deal with the threat. Few Americans, least of all Trump voters, are ready for such further misadventures in the Middle East.

Mr. Trump's uncritical embrace of the Saudis will also worsen another major problem. The U.S. is already too closely tied to the Saudi quagmire in Yemen, an unsuccessful intervention in a civil war that has caused widespread suffering and chaos. The Saudis' escalation helped to create conditions in which al Qaeda's Yemeni affiliate, probably the most capable of all al Qaeda branches, has grown dramatically.

The Saudis have made a Vietnam-like blunder, seeing Yemen's Houthi rebels as stalking horses for Iran rather than acknowledging that internal political jockeying has been the main driver of the Yemeni conflict. Iran has supplied the Houthis with some arms, but mostly to tie down Saudi forces; the U.S. has given the Saudis weapons and intelligence. Instead of plunging further in, we should be persuading the Saudis to cut their losses.



Another reason for Mr. Trump to reconsider his shift is that Iran may be changing. The recent reelection of President Hassan Rouhani was a sharp setback for the country's hard-line ayatollahs. Mr. Rouhani is no Jeffersonian democrat and has done ruthless things in his career, but he is also a pragmatist and advocate of reform, economic growth and re-engagement with the outside world. His conservative opponent, Ebrahim Raisi, was roundly rejected at the ballot box, and the clerical establishment didn't dare to falsify the outcome, as it has done before. Iran-watchers took note of YouTube videos of postelection celebrations with hitherto forbidden music and dancing in such hard-line strongholds as the northeastern city of Mashhad.

Given the possibility of reform in Iran, the U.S. needs to think strategically about the country's future once its repressive, ailing, 77-year-old supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, leaves the scene. Such hopes have been disappointed before, but this time reformers may well have a chance to alter the country's course.

While the U.S. continues to fulfill its alliance responsibilities to the Saudis, it should also be a steadying hand in the region. Though we should never give the Iranians a pass on bad behavior—supporting anti-Israel terrorism, arming Lebanon's Hezbollah, backing the murderous Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad—we also should avoid playing into the hands of Iran's hard-line clerics by disrupting the re-engagement with the global economy that the reformers are banking on.

The Iranians are the source of many evils in the Middle East but hardly all of them. There are few governments in the region for the U.S. to admire or support uncritically—and that definitely includes the Saudis, despite the assiduous courting of Mr. Trump by the young Saudi deputy crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman.

As the clash with our longtime partner Qatar shows, things in the Middle East can fall apart fast. That hardly means that the U.S. should be evenhanded between Iran and Saudi Arabia: We have a 70-year partnership with the Saudis and will continue to need their oil, intelligence cooperation and financial investments. But Mr. Trump should insist on a policy that puts American interests first.

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